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The Honorable John Conyers
Congress of the United States
2142 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

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Dear Congressman Conyers:

I am in receipt of your second letter of October 6 regarding Bill Bennett's comments.

My first inclination was to reply that we will just have to agree to disagree on this one; however, that would be taking the easy way out and, of course, would neither resolve anything nor satisfy anyone. The issues are just too important. Permit me then to carefully and specifically address your comments and questions...and offer a constructive response. I ask your indulgence at the length of my reply, but again, I believe the issues are of such consequence as to warrant a thorough response.

You begin your second letter by writing, "...your letter completely misses the point [why many] found these remarks so offensive. That is, in and of itself, disturbing." Believe me, we get the point and understand why many reacted negatively to a statement that was communicated completely out of context. Dr. Bennett said it best in a speech he gave to the Bakersfield Business Conference last Saturday, October 8: "What was presented in some of the media as my opinion would shock me as well; so I cannot blame many people for being mad as hell at what they heard. But such characterizations of my statements and views are not a fair, accurate, or true picture of either what I believe or what I said. In my conversation, I was raising an abhorrent hypothetical—and said so—an idea contrary to everything I believe and contrary to the record of my life, my work and my writings..." Mr. Conyers, we understand and even sympathize with the outrage; we do not, however, accept its legitimacy because what was most often reported was not what Dr. Bennett said. Intellectual honesty requires context.

You continue, "Mr. Bennett gratuitously injected racial stereotyping into a conversation with a caller about social security and abortion, stating that aborting black babies would reduce the crime rate."

There was nothing gratuitous about the hypothetical that Mr. Bennett raised. As you know, there is a vast body of writing and debate on the issue of race and abortion, race and social security, and race and crime. Even weeks after Katrina, the issues of race and crime were at the forefront of the national discussion of the tragedy. Moreover, it is difficult to avoid the

issue of race and abortion when one acknowledges that the founder of Planned Parenthood, Margaret Sanger, trafficked heavily in the eugenics movement. Dr. Bennett has publicly denounced Sanger's views. There is also much literature on the disproportionately high number of black abortions. Mr. Bennett is on record with pro-lifers everywhere deploring those abortions. There is also considerable writing and comment on the disproportionately high number of black victims as well as black perpetrators of crime. You may remember that during last year's presidential campaign, John Kerry said, "We've got more African Americans in jail than we do in college." While I do not believe his statement is factually correct, it does, to use your words, "perpetuate the negative stereotype" in a far more public forum than do Mr. Bennett's comments which he clearly qualified as "morally reprehensible." I can recall no outrage at Mr. Kerry's statement.

Also in your second letter you repeat a mischaracterization that I attempted to correct in my first letter when you write, "Regardless of whether he intended to offer serious consideration of the idea of aborting every black baby, and that he said *later* that it would be 'impossible, ridiculous, and morally reprehensible' to do so...." As I responded (and as the transcript plainly reveals), Mr. Bennett did not *later* describe his purposely noxious hypothetical as impossible, ridiculous and morally reprehensible—he said it as part of the same thought, and part of the same breath as his hypothetical; the denunciation was part and parcel, and contemporaneous to the thought he was crafting.

You continue in your letter, "You and Mr. Bennett should know African-Americans do not commit the majority of crimes in the United States." Of course we know that and Mr. Bennett neither said nor implied anything to the contrary.

Furthermore, you say in your letter, "*Freakonomics*, the book that Bennett cited to advance his argument, *does not address race at all* (emphasis mine) - that was solely Bennett's contribution." Mr. Conyers, I am left to wonder if you read the book. Not only is race mentioned several times in *Freakonomics*, Mr. Levitt even pushes the envelope in chapter six when he writes about people with "black" and "blackest" names and their inability to secure employment at the same levels as those with "white" and "whitest" names (pp 183-189). Mr. Levitt goes so far as to propose a solution to the problem: "Maybe DeShawn should just change his name" (p 187). He may have made his point tongue-in-cheek or, perhaps, like Bennett, Levitt was being deliberately noxious in his suggestion—I have no way of knowing; nevertheless, it was another of several race-related references in the book. Mr. Levitt also raises the race issue by citing a scholar who asks if "distinctive black culture" is "a cause of the economic disparity between blacks and whites or merely a reflection of it" (p 182). Finally, as an example, Levitt writes, "A DeShawn is more likely to have been handicapped by a low-income, low-education, single-parent background. His name is an indicator—not a cause—of his outcome" (p 189). To say, then, as you do, that Levitt does not address race in *Freakonomics* is just not the case. Even more to the point, it is crucial to remember that Mr. Bennett was *refuting* Levitt's theses on his radio show—not perpetuating it.

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Also, in *Freakonomics*, the preface to chapter four (p 115), refers to Levitt's 2001 paper on abortion and says, "...the very topic managed to offend just about everyone. Conservatives were enraged that abortion could be construed as a crime-fighting tool. Liberals were aghast that poor and black women were singled out." In the actual 2001 study Levitt says, "Fertility declines for black women [after the legalization of abortion] are three times greater than for whites (12 percent compared to 4 percent). Given that homicide rates of black youths are roughly nine times higher than those of white youths, racial differences in the fertility effects of abortion are likely to translate into greater homicide reductions." Levitt's general contention about abortion reducing crime was a major focus of discussion and concern within the pro-life community; the racial aspects and implications were as well.

Lastly, you asked for a list of the sponsors of Dr. Bennett's show. We have a long-standing policy of not releasing such information; therefore, I must respectfully decline your request.

Now to a proposed resolution: I understand that Dr. Bennett has offered to discuss the issues of race, crime and abortion with you publicly. Both of you are articulate and seasoned public servants, well-acquainted with the issues in question. Such a dialogue would provide a genuine public service and be an excellent way for you to address your concerns fairly and openly while affording Dr. Bennett the same opportunity. What better place to engage serious ideas and disagreements than on-the-air, available for all who are interested to hear? Why not just the two of you together in a studio—without aides or supporters—in serious one-on-one dialogue? I am pleased to offer Bill's radio program, *Morning in America*, as a venue for such a discussion; or, if you prefer, we would offer such a program at any reasonable time of day, on a mutually agreeable date and make it available to radio stations nationwide as a public service. I hope you agree with me that censorship is not the answer to disagreeable speech; more speech, dialogue and debate is the answer. I would be pleased to meet with you at your convenience to discuss the specifics of such a program.

Mr. Conyers, as I have said several times now, when taken out of context comments can, indeed, be offensive. I also understand that those misconceptions can result in real and deep hurt. That is unfortunate and we are truly sorry whenever that occurs; but to ensure that the press and other third parties set a statement in proper context is beyond our control. Dr. Bennett and I have gone to great lengths to recapture the context and set the record straight. The Salem Radio Network, Bill Bennett and I stand firmly and unapologetically against all forms of prejudice and bigotry. I hope you will join us in contending for truth, fairness and complete context too.

Sincerely,



Greg R. Anderson
President
Salem Radio Network

Enclosure

Ventura County Star

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Falling for gotcha politics

Media guilty of overreacting to Bennett story

By Joe R. Howry, jhowry@VenturaCountyStar.com
October 9, 2005



Like many people, I was appalled and angered by conservative commentator Bill Bennett's recent remarks that aborting all black babies would lower the nation's crime rate. Bennett may be many things, but he is not stupid, and only someone very stupid would say such a thing, whether he believed it or not. There was a disconnect here, and I set out to discover why someone so smart would say something so stupid.

As is often the case, nothing is as simple as it appears. Although Bennett said he does believe aborting all black babies would reduce the crime rate in the country, he quickly added that the idea is "impossible, ridiculous and morally reprehensible."

The context in which he made his remarks was in response to a caller on his nationwide talk radio show. The caller suggested the problems of the Social Security system were caused by abortions significantly reducing the number of tax-paying citizens. Bennett responded by saying he wasn't sure that was any more true than speculation in the best-selling book, "Freakonomics," that the crime rate is down because abortions are up. He probably should have left the argument there.

But in an apparent attempt to show how ridiculous simplistic solutions to complex problems can be, he waded into a political quagmire and ignited a furor.

The ensuing uproar was created by the watchdog group, Media Matters for America, which posted his comments on its Web site. Denunciations of Bennett quickly followed, going all the way up to members of Congress and the White House. President Bush even got into the act by saying, through his spokesman Scott McClellan, that he (the president) thought Bennett's remarks were inappropriate. Other rebukes were not as measured. Suddenly, the former secretary of education and best-selling author was widely accused of being a racist.

Is Bill Bennett a racist? Probably not. Is Bill Bennett stupid? Decidedly no, although he is as susceptible to brain hiccups as the rest of us. Did his remarks deserve the attention they got? No. Were his remarks taken out of context? Yes. Who's to blame for this teapot tempest?

Bennett can't escape some of the responsibility. He has been in public life long enough to know that inflammatory remarks, regardless of the context, will be blown out of proportion. He had a brain hiccup, he goofed, and he should have known better. Perhaps, because he should have known better, Bennett deserved some form of rebuke, but not to the extent he received.

And what about the media? Heck, what about The Star? Shouldn't we have known better? Did this story really deserve top of Page One play? Was this an honest news story or just another juicy controversy played way out of proportion to serve a narrow political end? The honest answer to the above questions is yes, no and yes.

In hindsight, there were several things about this story that should have made me uncomfortable. My first concern should have been whether we made sure the people we quoted who were reacting to Bennett's comments truly understood the context in which they were made. Given the hostility of some of the reaction, I am fairly certain we did not. I also should have been concerned about how and when we presented the context to our readers. The Star story did not contain that context until deep into the jump page. We know many readers don't read all the way to the end of stories, and we should have known that where the context was placed in this story, many readers would never see it.

Finally, I should have been concerned, above all else, that this was a political story. We see them all the time. One side or the other seizes upon an errant or ill-advised comment and blows it completely out of proportion. To be sure, it is unscrupulous, but the political game has become so dirty, few people seem to care.

The media should care, not only because it is the right thing to do, but because it is our responsibility to care. But like the two political protagonists, the media too easily get caught up in this perverse game, forgetting that our role is to expose the game and not as a player. In retrospect, The Star played the game with the Bill Bennett story, and the responsibility for that falls on my shoulders.

If there is a consolation in any of this, it is we recognize our mistake and we will work hard to make sure it doesn't happen again.

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